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“Being Aware of God’s Presents”

Luke 2:41-52

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Have you ever misplaced your child? I’m not asking if you’ve wanted to do that; I think I know the answer to that. But have you ever just completely lost track of your child?

Yes, I’ll step up and claim the Bad Parent Award today. Sydney was two at the time. I swore she was right beside me. I set her down and told her not to move, that the parking lot was full and there were cars all around and it was dark. The box I was lifting into my car was heavy, but I only looked away for a second. When I looked down, she was gone. Just that quickly, and my child was no longer by my side, no longer safe from the shoppers speeding to get the open parking spaces. I looked around frantically, waiting to hear screeching tires. And then I saw her, waddling toward the store she knew Mommy was in. Somehow, she had crossed one aisle in the parking lot and was headed for another. I swooped her up in my arms, and she looked at me with her innocent smile and said, “I go see Mommy!”, like it was the most natural explanation for running off. She was only gone five seconds, and yet for me, it felt like two lifetimes.

So I can only imagine how Mary and Joseph felt in this story when they realized Jesus was no longer by their side. They were coming back from a significant family vacation, a five-day journey to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. This year’s trip was made even more significant by the fact that Jesus was 12 years old, meaning it was his first year to be considered an adult under Jewish law. In other words, this was his first real Passover, a true rite of passage for him into adulthood. For us, it would be like our first communion after baptism, stretched out over the course of a week and marked by great feasts and celebrations.

So he does what any 12-year-old boy would do in the big city as a newly christened adult: he tunes out his parents and goes exploring. If they would have had iPods back then, his earplugs would have been firmly in place. Mary and Joseph look away for a second, and before they know it, they’ve lost Jesus.

Don’t be too quick to blame them. At first, they may sound like negligent parents, but before you call Child Protective Services, consider this: in those days, it was customary for the women and men to travel separately as they journeyed. The group of women would leave earlier in the day, on one end of the caravan, and the men would bring up the other end of the caravan, meeting the women later in the evening at the place of encampment. Chances are Mary thought he was with Joseph, and Joseph thought he was with Mary. “Where’s Jesus?” “Isn’t he with you?” “I thought he was with YOU!”

Thankfully, their story has a happy ending. A return to Jerusalem and desperate search ends in the Temple, where Jesus sat amongst the priests and scribes, listening and asking questions, learning from his elders. Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were “astonished,” a mixture of surprise and relief and anger. Mary turns on her mother voice, “Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” We told you to stay by our side, we told you not to stray. Don’t you know what could have happened to you?

Jesus' response to Mary is one of the most significant passages in the New Testament. Not only is it the first time he speaks in Luke's Gospel, but it is his first acknowledgement of who he is, and who he is to be. "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" "My father's house" is a loose translation of the original Hebrew. Scholars also have translated it to mean "in his realm, by his side, about his business," as in, "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" Notice the contrast between Mary's use of father, meaning Joseph, and Jesus' use of Father, capital F, meaning God. With this statement, we begin to get a sense of who this Jesus really is.

This story is a spiritual coming of age for Jesus. I appreciate Luke and the other gospel writers' silence about Jesus' childhood and adolescence. Other writings of this time period tell stories of Jesus as a child, breathing life into clay pigeons or withering friends who beat him at games. But I prefer the authorized biography, which says nothing at all about Jesus the teenager, except for this pivotal story. It leaves to our imagination Jesus' growing in wisdom and stature, growing in the knowledge of who he is as a person and who he is as the son of God.

We have all been given that same gift by God, the opportunity to grow in the knowledge of who we are and who we were created to be. That may sound like standard preacher talk, but I want to invite you to think about what that means. Do you ever spend time thinking about who you are, that God has created you and breathed life into you and blessed you with a purpose? Or by this time in life is that fact taken for granted or ignored, a forgotten or passing thought in the midst of more pressing realizations like strange noises in your car's engine and orthodontists' bills? Has that gift gone unopened?

Let me tell you a story. A working mother was trying to provide a decent Christmas for her six children. Her husband was a truck driver, working long hours and gone for weeks at a time, which meant she was left to raise them virtually by herself. Each year Christmas was a struggle, but this year was especially tough. Money seemed tighter than usual, and the kids' lists for Santa seemed longer than usual. She tried to decorate the house in the Christmas spirit, but things didn't seem to come together for her. Their tree looked like a piece of kindling, half the ornaments were broken, several strands of lights didn't work, her favorite nativity scene given to her by her grandmother was missing a piece. It was like something, or everything, was conspiring against her.

As if this weren't enough stress for her to deal with, she was worried about her 5-year old, Joey. He always marched to a beat slightly different than that of the rest of the children, but in the past weeks he'd seemed more distant than usual. One day, he was walking around the house with a wistful half-grin on his face. His mom asked him, "Joey, are you OK? What are you up to?" "Oh, nothing," he said with that smile on his face. His mom wanted to follow up, but the 2-year-old needed a diaper change, and besides, Joey didn't seem to be hurting anyone, so she dropped it.

On Christmas morning, she watched the present-opening frenzy with joy and a touch of sadness that she couldn't do more for her kids. Then she noticed Joey disappearing behind the tree and reappearing with seven presents he had obviously wrapped himself, one for his mother, father, and each of his siblings. She was baffled. Joey wasn't a crafts kind of person, he wouldn't have made them all presents. And he certainly didn't have money to buy gifts for everyone. So what was this?

As the kids began opening their presents from Joey, she suddenly understood. Joey's brother Tommy had had to borrow cleats for Little League this past summer because he lost his. His present was his missing cleats that Joey had found in the back of the closet. Joey gave his sister Britney her favorite doll she had misplaced last month when she became preoccupied with another toy. All the other presents were things they already owned, but had lost or misplaced during the course of the year. The family was more excited about receiving these recycled presents than they were their new ones. There's a special kind of joy in finding something you thought you lost.

Then Joey's mother opened her gift. It was the piece missing from her grandmother's nativity set, the baby Jesus, which had gotten buried under a stack of paperwork and junk mail. At that moment, the pathetic tree and meager number of presents were forgotten, replaced instead by her son's gift, a gift she already owned, given to her anew to enjoy and appreciate.

God has already given us the greatest gift imaginable, the gift of life and love, made known definitively to us through his son, Jesus Christ. We were created by God to love and serve God, but somewhere along the line, we may have lost track of that. We didn't do it intentionally, but we let it get away from us just the same. Maybe it was thrown in a closet and forgotten. Maybe we misplaced it when we became preoccupied with other priorities. Maybe we let it get buried under a stack of paperwork and to-do lists. For whatever reason, we've lost our understanding of the magnitude of the gift of God's love, of our own God-createdness.

So God has patiently searched the nooks and crannies of our lives, looking in the dark, forgotten places and under the stacks of responsibilities, and given us, once again, the present we already own. God wrapped it up in swaddling clothes, placed it in a manger, and said, "Here, this is for you."

Can you imagine how Mary and Joseph felt when they held Jesus for the first time after finding him in the temple? Can you imagine how I felt when I picked up Sydney and held her in my arms? There's a special kind of joy in finding something you thought you lost. That's how God feels about us. We may have been lost, but now we are found, found by the One who never stops searching for us and never stops gracing our lives with divine presents. My prayer is that in 2008, you find Jesus again, and the life-changing joy that awaits.